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ABSTRACT

Much of the research on bereavement and its consequences fails to account for social network factors. A sample of widows participated in a comprehensive national study to determine factors that enhanced or lessened their psychological well-being shortly after the death of their husbands, and over time. Two groups responded, those in the Crisis Phase, i.e., widowed for less than 18 months, and those in the Transition Phase, widowed between 19 months and 3 years. Widows who reported remarriage or a lack of grieving were excluded. Bradburn's Affect Balance Scale was used to measure psychological well-being in terms of support sources. Results indicated that widows in the Crisis Phase benefitted most from parental support, followed by support from widowed or single friends. As problems and adjustment tasks of widows varied through the phases of widowhood, so did her support needs and salient support sources vary. (Author/KMF)

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SUPPORT FROM FAMILY AND FRIENDS: WHAT HELPS THE WIDOW?

Elizabeth A. Bankoff

The study to be reported here was concerned with the ways in which social support from significant others tends to enhance or lessen the psychological well-being of widows both shortly after the death of their husbands and over time.

Despite a growing consensus that a person's social network plays a crucial role by serving as a buffer between life events and adaptation, unfortunately, as Maddison and Raphael (1975) have recently lamented, much of the research on bereavement and its consequences fails to take social network factors into account. Moreover, even those who argue for the importance of a supportive informal social network have tended to implicitly assume that the social support needs of the widow are relatively fixed and, therefore, who is good as well as what is good for a widow during one phase of her bereavement are equally good for her at a different phase. This study questioned these assumptions. In particular, the following questions were addressed:

Does it make a difference who is giving the support? That is, does the support from different informal network sources differentially relate to the widow's sense of psychological well-being? If so, which sources of support seem to be most crucial? And, finally, does the relative importance of support from particular sources change as widows move from the early adjustment phase in which they are enveloped by intense grief to the phase in which their grief has lessened, allowing them to begin to build a new life?

The findings presented here are based on a sample of widows which participated in a comprehensive national study entitled: "Self-help and Urban

Problems: Alternative Help Systems" conducted at the University of Chicago. To procure the widowed sample, lists of names of widowed people were obtained from two organizations of widowed people, one centralized in Chicago and the other nation-wide. These lists included names of widowed people who were members of these organizations as well as names of those who had been invited to join the organization, but did not. A total of 2798 questionnaires were mailed. Fifty percent of those delivered were returned. From these returns two groups of Caucasian widows who had completed their questionnaires were identified for the present study. The Crisis Phase group consisted of ninety-eight women who had been widowed less than 18 months and reported that they were still in the midst of their intense grief. The Transition Phase group consisted of 147 women who had been widowed between nineteen months and three years and reported that they were still grieving but to a limited extent. Widows who reported that they had remarried or were no longer grieving were excluded from this study as were all of the widowers.

Preliminary analyses indicated that these two groups of widows did not differ on relevant background characteristics such as age, work status, SES, religious affiliation, size of hometown community, living arrangements, levels of education, economic distress, prior dependency on spouse, etc., which suggests that these two groups comprise basically the same type of women (see Table 1). Sixty-two percent of our sample were employed at least part-time, 43% lived alone, although 93% were mothers. Forty-six percent were Catholics, 54% were Protestants, 22% had earned at least a Bachelor's degree, while 10% had not completed high school. The mean age was 51 years, and the average number of years lived in their present community was 27. Although these analyses indicate that basically the same type of women make up our two phase groups, as expected, additional analyses indicate that these two phase group samples were very different in terms of their psychological pain and distress.

Compared with their counterparts in the later transition phase, the early widows in the crisis phase showed significantly less overall psychological well-being and significantly greater depression, anxiety and psychological distress (see Table 1).

Thus, in summary, it appears reasonable to assume that, in the aggregate, these two samples comprise the same type of women. The only major difference is that they are in different phases in their adjustment to the loss of their spouse.

-- Table 1. about here --

Bradburn's Affect Balance Scale was employed as our indicator of psychological well-being. Support was assessed in the following manner: each respondent was asked to indicate how much of six different types of social support they actually received from each of seven potential support sources. The sources included: parents, in-laws, children, other relatives, married friends, widowed or otherwise single friends and neighbors. The six types of support included: attention, intimacy, assurance of emergency assistance, emotional support, guidance and approval of a new life style. Support scores were then determined for each of the seven sources by taking the mean score across all six types of support provided by each particular source. For example, the summary support score for the in-laws represents the average amount of all the six types of support provided the widow by her in-laws.

And so, we asked: How are the various sources of support from within their informal social networks related to the widows' sense of well-being? To address this question the support scores for each of the seven sources were multiply regressed on our indicator of psychological well-being. Separate analyses were performed for each of the two phase groups in order to determine whether the same or different sources were important in the different phases.

— Table 2. about here —

The results of these analyses appear to be simple and straightforward (see Table 2). Yes, source does make a difference for the widows in both phases. However, which sources are important appears to depend upon the phase of widowhood. For the early widows in the crisis phase, two and only two sources were positively associated with their sense of well-being. In order of importance there were, first, parents and then widowed or single friends. Together, the support from these two sources accounted for sixteen percent of the variance in well-being, with parental support alone accounting for eleven percent. On the other hand, for widows in the transition phase more sources appear to be salient. In order of importance, support from the following sources was positively associated with these later widows' sense of well-being: widowed or single friends, neighbors, parents and children. In addition, the results indicate a negative association between support from these widows' married friends and their sense of well-being. Together, support from these five sources accounted for seventeen percent of the variance in well-being, with support from the widowed or single friends alone accounting for ten percent.

And so, what to make of these findings? If time permitted we might explore all the questions which arise from these results. However, because of time constraints I will limit my discussion, focusing on several particularly striking issues that have emerged.

First, why does support from parents appear to be very important for the well-being of these early widows while support from their children (which was plentiful indeed) appears to have no effect? Certainly, there are multiple explanations. But one reason may be that the widow's children also are grieving and in need of support. They too have suffered a major loss and as such, as Parkes (1972) suggests, are themselves placing a major burden on the widow even as they attempt to fulfill their filial responsibilities. On the

other hand, the widow's parents are not usually subject to such intense grief when their son-in-law dies. Therefore, they can provide relatively unhampered nurturance during this crisis period, for they do not require support from the widow in return.

In addition, as Walker, et. al. (1977) suggest, during the period of intense grief soon after the death of a spouse, the most salient need is usually for empathy and strong emotional support. That is, the widow needs nuturance. She needs to be able to be dependent, to be taken care of. In this light, it ceases to be surprising and, in fact, becomes understandable why "Mom and Dad" or "Mom," the prototypical providers of nurturance, become the most salient sources of support during the crisis phase of bereavement.

Finally, an additional (non-competing) explanation for the importance of early parental support comes to mind if we allow ourselves to speculate that "parents" may in fact mean only "Mom." That is, because the average age of our widows is 51, the average age of their parents is approximately 75. As such, it is probably safe to assume that a substantial number of the widows only have one parent still living -- their mother, who is, in fact, a widow herself. What this suggests is that in addition to being best able to provide unhampered nurturant support, the widows' mothers are also able to be absolutely empathic. They've been there. They know how it feels. It may well be, as Silverman (1972) among others have suggested, that widows have a great need for emotional support from people who understand because they have gone through the same experience. As one of the early widows in our study reported to us, "What's helpful? Why people who are in the 'same boat'. Unless you've been there you just can't understand. And, real understanding, that's what we need. At least, that's what I need."

Concomitantly, this "same boat" explanation obviously suggests why the early widows' widowed friends were important sources of support. They too can

be empathic, for they too have "been there."

But, if parents are such crucial sources of support for the early widows, why do they appear to be far less salient support sources for widows in the later transition phase, while their widowed or single friends and neighbors assume a more crucial role as providers of support?

In order to interpret these results it is important to keep in mind the psychological states, adjustment tasks and particular problems of widows in these different phases of widowhood. As earlier noted, widows in the early phase are experiencing intense grief and need, above all, empathic, nuturant emotional support which appears to be best provided by "Mom" or "Mom and Dad." However, widows in the later transition phase are no longer traumatized by grief. However, they are now facing a whole new set of adjustment tasks and problems of building a new independent life, new role relationships and a new identity. Thus, as Walker, et. al. (1977) suggest, during this later phase we would expect the widow to have somewhat less need for nurturance and more need for information and new social contacts to help her reintegrate her life as a single person. Thus, well-meaning but dependency fostering support from parents may be of little help as she seeks to develop a new life, whereas peer relationships, particularly with widowed or otherwise single friends can provide guidance, information, as well as new social contacts that might facilitate her transition.

In short, it would appear the effectiveness of the support the widow receives does seem to be contingent upon who is providing it. Moreover, as the widow's problems and adjustment tasks vary by phase of widowhood, it would appear that her support needs, and thus, the salient support sources vary accordingly. As Parkes (1972) maintains:

> If the early stage of bereavement is a time when family, friends and others should rally round and relieve the newly bereaved person of some of [her] roles and obligations, the later stage is one which the bereaved person should be helped to establish [her] own autonomy. It may be important for a bereaved person to grieve. It is also important for [her] to stop grieving, to give up [her] withdrawal from life and to start building a new identity. (p.25)

Thank you.

Table 1. Comparison Between Crisis Phase Sample and Transition Phase Sample on Personal and Background Characteristics and Indicators of Psychological Distress

Dimensions of Comparison	Phase of Widowhood		Significance[a]
	Crisis Phase (n=98)	Transition Phase (n=147)	
Personal and Background Characteristics			
Age (years)	51.0	51.2	NS
Employed	58.0%	64.0%	NS[b]
SES	47.1	46.3	NS
Education	12.9	12.8	NS
Economic distress	1.6	1.7	NS
Length of residency (years)	27.0	26.3	NS
Number of children living	2.8	2.9	NS
Catholic	51.0%	42.0%	NS[b]
Protestant	49.0%	58.0%	NS[b]
Caucasion	100.0%	100.0%	NS[b]
Need for affiliation	2.4	2.3	NS
Prior dependency on spouse	2.7	2.7	NS
Indicators of Psychological Distress			
Overall psychological well-being	0.2	1.1[c]	.004
Overall psychological distress	2.0	1.8[c]	.000
Depression	2.4	2.0[c]	.000
Anxiety	1.8	1.6[c]	.005

[a]Unless otherwise indicated, all statistical analyses are calculated by ANOVA between crisis phase and transition phase means.

[b]Fisher's Exact Test.

[c]This group is less distressed.

Table 2. Stepwise Multiple Regression Analyses: Significant Source of Support Predictors for Psychological Well-Being[a]

Phase of Widowhood	Dependent Variable	Source of Support	Beta	R^2	F	Overall R^2	Overall F	Overall Significance
Crisis Phase (n=98)	Overall Psychological Well-Being					.16	3.66	$p < .05$
		Parents	.99	.11	4.05			
		Widowed/Single Friends	.62	.05	2.18			
Transition Phase (n=147)	Overall Psychological Well-Being					.17	2.48	$p < .05$
		Widowed/Single Friends	.93	.10	4.23			
		Neighbors	.46	.03	1.40			
		Parents	.31	.02	1.10			
		Children	.32	.01	.86			
		Married Friends	-.29	.01	.73			

[a]Sources of support were entered into the predictive equation only if they contributed to the overall significance.

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